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INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000809

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2018

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SUBJECT: SULTAN TAKES AIM AT CORRUPTION IN SPEECH OPENING
MAJLIS OMAN

REF: MUSCAT 665

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In his annual speech opening the Majlis Oman, Sultan Qaboos surprised his audience in addressing the issue of public corruption, warning government employees and officials who use their positions for personal gain that they would be held accountable under the law. Omanis welcomed the Sultan's remarks, although some doubt that the government will seriously pursue corrupt individuals close to the reigns of power. End Summary.

¶2. (U) In keeping with tradition, Sultan Qaboos presided over the ceremonial opening session of the Majlis Oman on November 11 in Muscat. The annual event was attended by royal family members, members of the Majlis al-Dawla (appointed upper house) and Majlis al-Shura (elected lower house), government ministers, senior military officials and heads of diplomatic missions, as well as press representatives. In his speech, the Sultan departed from usual themes to emphasize the importance of good governance, rule of law, and the placing of the public interest "over all other considerations." Noting "the need for a constant revision of the State's administrative system," he stated that public employees had "a huge responsibility" on their shoulders in furthering the country's development. He accordingly warned that government workers and officials who "stray from the right path and consider their job as a means to achieving personal gain" would be held accountable by the state legal system and judiciary. "We are required not to allow anyone to be above law and order," the Sultan declared as he tasked the county's "monitoring apparatus" to be alert in "the enforcement of justice."

¶3. (U) The Sultan also stressed the value of "human resources" in building Oman. Acknowledging that properly trained and developed individuals are the "cornerstone" of society, he expressed his determination to "spare no effort" in continuing to provide the necessary resources and incentives, including educational opportunities, to enhance the performance of the Omani workforce. The Sultan further recognized the utility of information technology and urged government institutions to provide additional e-government services.

¶4. (U) Noting the "turmoil prevailing in the international arena" due to the global financial crisis, the Sultan stated that Oman had "averted" the effects of the crisis on its own economy due to "the policies adopted by our government over recent years." After confirming that the government would move forward with its planned building and development policies, he highlighted the need for Oman to exert more efforts to diversify sources of income, explore ways of benefiting from alternative energy, and achieve food security.

¶5. (U) In closing, the Sultan emphasized Oman's continued commitment to promoting world security and prosperity through its long-standing policy of "cooperation ... among nations"

and participation in regional and international organizations. He also voiced hope that the 29th Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, scheduled to be held in late December in Muscat, would be a "success."

¶6. (SBU) Reactions to the Sultan's remarks on corruption were widespread on Omani blogs and internet fora. Most of the participants welcomed his statements on this sensitive topic and viewed it as a sign of the Sultan's impatience with alleged abusive practices, mismanagement, and disregard for the law by government officials and influential business leaders. While recognizing that corruption would never completely disappear, some Omanis expressed hope that it could be minimized if the government's monitoring apparatus was given real authority to investigate and take action against corrupt individuals. (Note: Sayyid Abdullah bin Hamad al-Busaidi, Chief of the State Audit Institution, told Arabic daily "Oman" the week following the Sultan's speech that his staff would audit the public sector to detect "malpractices that serve personal interests," but also stated that financial corruption was "limited" in Oman. End Note.)

¶7. (C) Others on-line, however, were less optimistic and voiced doubt that the government would go after Omanis close to the reigns of power. As an example of continued perceived corruption, bloggers and chatroom participants traded rumors about the son of the influential Minister of National Economy, Ahmad bin Abdulnabi al-Makki, who is allegedly attempting to bend laws in order to build a hotel near the Muscat airport.

¶8. (C) Comment: While most of the Sultan's statements

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reflected recurring themes from previous speeches, his remarks on the accountability of government officials were unprecedented. Several Omanis commented to emboffs on how extraordinary it was for him to speak publicly on this topic. The Sultan's decision to spotlight corruption (while never actually using the word) was also consistent with his recent sacking of two ministers for abuse of power (reftel) and likely designed to put other officials on notice that improper actions may bear serious consequences. End Comment.

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